

All quotations from the Qur'ān translation are either taken from Muḥammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1980), or 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, new edition with revised translation and commentary (Brentwood: Amana Corporation, 1991).

Say: "O People of the Book come to common terms as between us and you" (*Yā Ahl al-Kitāb ta'ālaw ila kalimah sawā' baynanā wa baynakum*): that we worship none but Allāh, that we associate no partners with Him, that we shall not take lords and patrons other than Allāh. If then they turn back, Say ye: "Bear witness that we are Muslims" (*faqūlū ashhadū bia'nnā muslimūn*).

(*Sūrat Āl-Imrān*, 3:64)



THE “PEOPLE OF THE BOOK”
(*AHL AL-KITĀB*) AND THE “PEOPLE OF A
DUBIOUS BOOK” (*AHL SHUBHAT KITĀB*)
IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS TRADITION

BY
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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to bring to light the nature of the “People of the Book” (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), and the “People of a Dubious Book” (*Ahl Shubhat Kitāb*) as developed by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d.548/1153) in Islamic Religious Tradition. The study is carried out both by analyzing Islam as the only genuinely revealed religion as well as by addressing various Muslim scholars’ attitudes and responses to the reality and nature of the People of the Book and the People of a Dubious Book apropos the Qur’ān and Islamic Religious Tradition.

Among the findings of this study are: (i) Islam is the only religion recognized as the revealed religion. All the earlier prophets have come with the same revealed religion which is known as *Dīn al-Fiṭrah* (the Ever-True Religion) or *al-Dīn al-Ḥaqq* (the Righteous Religion) at their time. With the dawn of the Final Prophet, i.e., Muḥammad (Peace Be Upon Him), this revealed religion is officially declared Islam. (ii) The difference between the Muslims and the People of the Book. The Muslims are not recognized as the People of the Book because their religion, i.e., Islam, is universal and is meant for all mankind. The People of the Book, on the other hand, are addressed by this name because they are the holders of revealed books whose teachings are designated only to them. (iii) The identity and nature of the People of the Book, i.e., the Jews and Christians, is such that they cannot be considered as followers of revealed religion. Rather, they are both cultures based on a revealed book. (iv) The identity and nature of the People of a Dubious Book, i.e., the Zoroastrians (*al-Majūs*), the Sabians (*al-Ṣābi’ūn*), and the Manicheans (*al-Mānawīyyah*) as developed and examined by al-Shahrastānī.

ملخص البحث

هذه الدراسة محاولة لإلقاء الضوء على ماهية "أهل الكتاب" وأهل شبهة كتاب" في

التراث الإسلامي كما طورها محمد عبد الكريم الشهرستاني (المتوفى سنة ٥٤٨ هجرية/١١٥٣

ميلادية). تتم معالجة هذه الدراسة بتحليل الإسلام على أنه الدين الوحيد الذي أتى به الوحي، وبالتعرض

لميول وردود فعل عدد من العلماء المسلمين فيما يخص بحقيقة ماهية "أهل الكتاب" وأهل شبهة

كتاب" وعلاقتها بالقرآن والتراث الإسلامي.

من بعض النتائج التي توصل إليها هذا البحث: ١) إن الإسلام هو الدين الوحيد المُعترف به كدين

منزل وإن الأنبياء والرسل السابقين أتوا بنفس الدين المنزل المعروف بـ "دين الفطرة" (الدين الحق) في

عصور رسالاتهم. ومع بزوغ فجر آخر الأنبياء والمرسلين محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم تم إعلان أن هذا

الدين هو الإسلام. ٢) الفرق بين المسلمين وأهل الكتاب هو أن المسلمين لا يُعتبرون أهل كتاب وذلك

لأن دينهم (الإسلام) دين عالمي وأن المخاطب به هو الإنسانية جمعاء. أما أهل الكتاب فيُخاطَبون بهذا الاسم

لأنهم خَمَلَة كتب منزلة جاءت رسالتها موجّهة إليهم وحدهم. ٣) هوية ماهية أهل الكتاب

(اليهود والنصارى) تقوم على اعتبار أن اليهودية والنصرانية ليستا ديننا مولاً وإنما ثقافتان

تأسستا على كتب منزلة. ٤) إن هوية ماهية أهل شبهة كتاب وهم

الزرادشتيين/المجوس والصابئة والمناوية هي كما طورها وقام بدراستها الشهرستاني.

APPROVAL PAGE

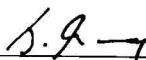
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, **except** where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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Date: 11 MARCH 2004

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THE "PEOPLE OF THE BOOK" (*AHL AL-KITĀB*) AND "THE PEOPLE OF A DUBIOUS BOOK" (*AHL SHUBHAT KITĀB*) IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS TRADITION

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*

Dedicated to my loving wife and children,

Wan Teh Sharifah Binti Wan Lolok,

Muhammad Afif Asnawi,

Nurul Iffah Hanani and Muhammad Irfan Hakimi

who incessantly provide me love and caring

and make *du'ā'* for our success

in this World and the Hereafter

*

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“O my Lord! So order me that I may be grateful for Thy favors, which Thou hath bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may work the righteousness that will please Thee, and admit me by Thy grace, to the ranks of Thy righteous servants.”
(*Sūrat al-Naml*, 27:19).

I must admit that it is after pursuing my post-graduate studies at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) that my understanding of Islam as a religion, culture and civilization has been intensified. The professors are energetic and knowledgeable, the library is rich full of invaluable books and priceless information, the colleagues are helpful and friendly, and the environment is charming and pleasant for studies. Indeed, I am truly honored to be one of ISTAC’s students.

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Here, I would also like to state that I am responsible for all the mistakes and shortcomings in this work.

Last but far from least: "And He is Allāh. There is no God but He. To Him be praise, at the first and at the last. For Him is the Command and to Him shall ye (all) be brought back." (*Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ*, 28:70).

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INTRODUCTION

1. Muslim Encounter with Members of Other Religious Traditions

The Qur'ān is the Speech of Allāh (*Kalām Allāh*), verbatim, as the Muslims believe and receive it. As observed by al-Attas, it is the Speech of Allāh which is revealed in a new form of Arabic. As the Speech of Allāh revealed in a new form of Arabic, the description of His nature therein is therefore the description of Himself by Himself in His own words according to that linguistic form. The Arabic of the Qur'ān, its interpretation in the Tradition and its authentic and authoritative usage throughout the ages, establishes the validity of that language to a degree of eminence in serving to describe reality and truth.¹ Being the Speech of Allāh, it does not only provide divine guidance to its audience, but also dispenses references and information concerning religions, religious beliefs, norms and basic principles, which are related to various aspects of life. Hence, it is on the basis of Qur'ānic directives that the Muslims can devise their approach to understand other religious traditions.²

The focus of the present study will be the problem of other religious traditions as seen from the Qur'ān and Islamic Religious Tradition, especially the religions of "*Ahl al-Kitāb*" (the People of the Book), and of "*Ahl Shubhat Kitāb*" (the People of a Dubious Book) as exclusively developed and applied by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahraṣṭānī (d.548/1153). Needless to say, the issue of the People of the Book has long been of central significance to Islam and later to the study of comparative

¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2001), 6, hereinafter cited as *The Prolegomena*.

² *Ibid.*, 118. Cf. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: An Exposition of The Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998), 344ff, hereinafter cited as *The Educational Philosophy*. Indeed it is only the Qur'ān that portrays information and references concerning other religious traditions. Such recognition is acknowledged not only by Muslim scholars, but also by Western scholars such as H.U. Weibrecht Stanton who declares, "No scripture in the world teaches such a comparative religion as the Qur'ān." On such a statement, see: H.U. Weibrecht Stanton, *The Teaching of the Qur'ān* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1969), 71.

religion. Many Muslim and European scholars have hence taken close heed of the People of the Book and their role as the holders of sacred books. The question of the People of the Book becomes more crucial when al-Shahrastānī develops another category identified as “*Man Lahu Shubhat Kitāb*,” (those who possess doubtful sacred scrolls) or “*Ahl Shubhat Kitāb*” (the People of a Dubious Book), the term that may be considered similar to that of al-Shahrastānī.

The purpose of this study is of utmost significance as it is a serious attempt to analyze various views taken from Muslim scholars on studying the meaning “the People of the Book” and the “People of a Dubious Book” in Islamic Religious Tradition. Since no independent research on the position of the People of a Dubious Book in Islamic Religious Tradition has been carried out before, our aim is to determine how Muslim scholars identify and justify the People of the Book and the People of a Dubious Book.

It must be stated that abundant studies have been carried out by the Muslim scholars on the People of the Book based on the body of literature provided.³ Among the earliest and prominent extant works belonging to this genre is the work of Abū Rayḥan Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī (d.443/1051). In his work of *al-Athār al-Bāqiyah ‘an al-Qurūn al-Khālīyyah*, though his main consideration is to dwell on the Hindus and Hinduism, alternately he includes some data on the People of the Book, namely, the Jews and the Christians. His remarks about them although brief, yet significant and prove to be indispensable arguments for contemporary scholars. In his

³ Descriptions of the earlier Muslim authors and their works on the People of the Book can be found in Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist* (Tehran: n.p., 1971). Cf. Bayard Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970). However, it would be pertinent to note that most of the earlier works concerning the People of the Book are lost today with the exception of some scattered excerpts and descriptions found in the works of later scholars. On such a statement, see for instance: David Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū ‘Isā al-Warrāq’s against the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 31ff.

treatment of Judaism, he points out fundamental differences of their religious traditions with Islam. He illustrates the deficiencies of the Torah, comments on the Jewish religious exercises and argues against the Jewish festivals and rituals, which he regards as preposterous and full of absurdity.

In dealing with Christianity, al-Bīrūnī seems to be very well aware of four main versions of the Evangel.⁴ He describes them as the tabulated books which contain many an inaccurate and deficient data especially concerning Prophet 'Isā (Peace Be Upon Him). He is also aware of the fact that apart from these four books, there are also other Evangels that are found to differ in some parts from the four tabulated Evangels. It is in view of these numerous versions and their deficiencies that he encapsulates, among the Christians' sacred books there is no book of the prophets to be found out which man with good faith can rely on.⁵

Abū Muḥammad 'Alī Ibn Ḥazm (d.456/1063) is another significant figure who has produced exhaustive works on the non-Muslim religions, particularly on the People of the Book. In dealing with religious traditions, Ibn Ḥazm employs a six-fold typology of religion.⁶ Within this six-fold typology, he places the Jews in the sixth category, which represents the peoples who believe in the Oneness of God, in the phenomenon of prophecy and in the revealed books. However, in terms of the prophets, they accept some and reject others. Interestingly, Ibn Ḥazm does not place

⁴ Detailed accounts of these four Evangels are provided in Chapter Three, p.133, and n. 324.

⁵ Detailed accounts of al-Bīrūnī's treatment of the People of the Book, see for instance: Edward C. Sachau, *Al-Bīrūnī's Chronology of Ancient Nations or Vestiges of the Past* (Lahore: Hijra International Publishers, 1983), 18-27, hereinafter cited as *The Chronology*; Cf. Kamar Oniah Kamaruzzaman, "Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft. A Case Study of the Works and Contributions of Abū Rayḥan Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī" (Ph.D. diss., ISTAC, 1996), 164-186, hereinafter cited as *al-Bīrūnī*.

⁶ Details of his typology, see for instance: Abū Muḥammad 'Alī Ibn Ḥazm, *Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Aḥwa' wa al-Niḥal*, ed. by Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1999), 1:12-13, hereinafter cited as *al-Faṣl*. Cf. Ghulam Haider Aasi, "Muslim Understanding of other Religions: An Analytical Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Aḥwa' wa al-Niḥal" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1986), 150-151, hereinafter cited as *The Study*.

the Christians along with the Jews in this last category although he is fully aware of the fact that they, too, believe in the Oneness of God, the divine call of the prophets and in the revealed books. Rather, he justifies the Christians in the fourth category, which represents the peoples who believe that the Creator and the Providence of the universe are more than one. The main reason on account of which the Christians are categorized in the fourth category is their belief in the Trinity, stresses Ibn Ḥazm.⁷

Similarly, Ibn Ḥazm is fully aware of the fact that the Jews and the Christians have long distorted their respective revealed books, i.e., *Kitāb al-Tawrah* (the Torah) and *Kitāb al-Injīl* (the Evangel). In dealing with these altered revealed books as well as their dogmas and doctrines, he takes into account their claims and arguments and then he confronts them with cogent arguments, which demonstrate the irrational and illogical aspects of their ideas and beliefs.

The other well-known author whose contribution in this genre of literature is one of the greatest medieval masters, Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111). The principal concern in his studies is to distinguish the true Muslims from the misbelievers as well as the polytheists. It may well be that it is on this basis that in his work of *Fayṣal Tafriqah bayna Islām wa Zandaqah*, he profoundly particularized the People of the Book, namely, the Christians into three divisions.⁸ We shall deal with these three divisions thoroughly in due course. However, with this present discussion, it is sufficed to say that such a division proposed by al-Ghazālī has helped many a scholar to understand better the nature of the People of the Book.

⁷ Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl*, 1:12-13, 64-65, and 117ff. Cf. Aasi, *The Study*, 150-151, 161-216, and 233-359.

⁸ Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah bayna al-Islām wa Zandaqah*, ed. by Riyāḍ Muṣṭafa 'Abd Allāh (Beirut: Manshurāt Dār al-Ḥikmah, 1986), 105-106, hereinafter cited as *al-Fayṣal*; Cf. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 114, hereinafter cited as *Qur'ānic Christians*. The discussion on this issue is provided in Chapter Two, p. 76-77.

Another figure worthy of attention in the study of the People of the Book is Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d.548/1153). A number of writings have been credited to al-Shahrastānī, but the major source of his fame is the *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, a monumental treatise on religious sects and philosophical groups. Its popularity in the medieval period is amply attested to by the existence of numerous studies in many libraries all over the world.

In this very book, al-Shahrastānī treats all the Muslim, non-Muslim sects and several philosophical positions known in his time with due balance and absence of vituperation. His intention, thus, is to highlight the historical account of these sects as well as to point out their emergence, survival and religious practices. Since his work was like a small but concise encyclopedia, al-Shahrastānī gives fair criticism on these sects. In addition, he makes a clear distinction between truth (*ḥaqq*) and falsehood (*bāḥīl*) which he expresses throughout his presentation of the sects in this book *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*.

Concerning his typology of world religious traditions and ideologies, al-Shahrastānī ranks each non-Muslim religious tradition and ideology according to its proximity to Islam. Based on the religious and quasi-religious groups known to him, he classifies the religious traditions of non-Muslims into four general categories. The first category comprises the recipients of revealed books (*kitāb munzal*), i.e., the Jews and Christians. The second consists of the recipients of scrolls (*ṣuḥuf*), i.e., the Zoroastrians, Sabians and Manicheans. The third constitutes those who subscribe to laws and binding judgments without the benefit of a revealed book, i.e., the ancient Sabians, and the fourth category represents those who have neither a revealed book

nor fixed laws, i.e., the ancient as well as the materialist philosophers, the star-worshippers and the Brahmins.⁹

Within this structure, al-Shahrastānī presents a vast range of data, as varied in quality as it is broad in scope. He takes into account the claims and arguments of all these religious-philosophical groups and then exhibits the irrational and illogical aspects of their ideas and beliefs. In terms of presenting the issue under debate, he directly proceeds to the main points, records the arguments of the opponents and then refutes them by means of his clear and strong presentation. The way he treats the sects is also consistent and systematic. For instance, all philosophies and religious systems that do not accept the phenomenon of prophecy are grouped together. Judaism and Christianity, due to their closeness to Islam and because they share with Islam their belief in God, in Prophecy and in the Scriptures, are dealt with more comprehensively than other religious traditions and philosophical ideologies. So far as his presentation of the religious scriptures of the Jews and Christians is concerned, his main criterion is that a scripture, which is revealed by God, cannot be inconsistent and contradictory in its contents and teaching.

Before turning to the body of literature on the study of the People of a Dubious Book, it seems appropriate to mention two of the theologians whose works also contain some data on the People of the Book. Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad Muhyi al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī (d.638/1240) is one of the earliest theologians who includes some data concerning the People of the Book in the framework of his conception of religion.

⁹ Details of his typology, see for instance: Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, ed. by Amīr 'Alī Mahnā and 'Alī Ḥasan Fā'ūr, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1997), 1:49-50, hereinafter cited as *al-Milal*. See also: Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1976), 16-17, hereinafter cited as *The Indian Religions*; Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Muslim Sects and Divisions: The Section on Muslim Sects in Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, trans. by A.K. Kazi and J.G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 31, hereinafter cited as *Muslim Sects and Divisions*; and Muḥammad Azizan Sabjan, "Shahrastānī on the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), A Study of His *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*" (M.A. thesis, ISTAC, 2000), 5, hereinafter cited as *al-Shahrastānī*.

Most of his data on these peoples are found scattered in his voluminous works of *al-Futūḥat al-Makkiyyah* and *Ijāz al-Bayān fi al-Tarjamah 'an al-Qur'ān*.

Ibn 'Arabī accentuates the role of Islam as the one and only true religion by confronting the Jews and Christians with his strong arguments and razor-sharp criticisms. He refutes the Jewish concept of abrogation, emphatically excoriates them on the distortion of their Torah and vehemently criticizes them for their pride and arrogance. The same measures he takes against the Christians. Apart from excoriating their dogmas and doctrines such as the Trinity, the Crucifixion, and their praise of 'Īsā (Peace Be Upon Him), he is also criticizing their four Evangels, which they consider as authentic. He is of the view that these four books contain erroneous data and fallacious doctrines which are totally different from the true *al-Injīl* inspired to 'Īsā (Peace Be Upon Him).¹⁰

Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyya (d.717/1317) is another notable figure who has produced major works that dealt with the People of the Book. Among his major works is *al-Jawāb al-Ṣāḥih li man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ*, a work whose length and scope have never been equaled in Muslim critiques of the Christian

¹⁰ Detailed accounts of Ibn 'Arabī's treatment of the People of the Book, see for instance: Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥat al-Makkiyyah*, ed. by 'Uthmān Yahyā, 13 vols. (Cairo: al-Hai'ah al-Maṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li'l Kitāb, 1972), 1:354, 2:28, 306, 374, and 592, 3:83, 242-243, 4:138, 154, and 526, hereinafter cited as *FM*; Cf. idem., *Ijāz al-Bayān fi al-Tarjamah 'an al-Qur'ān in Raḥmah min al-Raḥman fi Tafsiṛ wa Ishārāt al-Qur'ān min Kalām al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī*, edited and presented by Maḥmud Maḥmud al-Ghurāb, vol. 1 (Damascus: n.p., 1988), 28-62, hereinafter cited as *Ijāz*. See also: Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989); idem., "A Sufi Approach to Religious Diversity, Ibn 'Arabī on the Metaphysics of Revelation," in *Religions of the Heart: Essays Presented to Frithjof Schuon on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William Stoddart (Washington: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1991); idem., *Faith and Practice of Islam: Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); idem., *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn 'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); idem., *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn 'Arabī's Cosmology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998); Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn 'Arabī, The Book and The Law*, trans. by David Streight (Albany: State University of New York, 1993); idem., *Seal of Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. by Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: The Islamic Text Society, 1993); and Mohd. Sani Badron, "Ibn 'Arabī's Conception of Religion" (M.A. thesis, ISTAC, 1998), 62-70, and 105-129, hereinafter cited as *Ibn 'Arabī*.